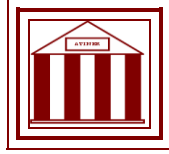


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**Etheatre Project:**  
**The Director as Researcher**

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## **Etheatre Project: The Director as Researcher**

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### **Abstract**

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to investigate the original methodologies that are developed in a practice based research (PBR) in digital performance, by the compination of theatre directing and research methodologies. Referring to the case of Etheatre Project, the in-progress PhD research of the author, this paper discusses emergent issues of the PBR new academic dicipline, such as mediation, documentation and originality. Etheatre Project explores the interactive and political potentials of cyberformance by the use of free internet spaces as theatrical stage, aiming to redefine the characteristics of theatre and the methodologies of theatre directing within the phenomenon of ‘remediation’ of cyberculture. The paper discusses the use of the creative process as research methodology and the role of the director as researcher, as dealt with by Jamieson (2008), Leavy (2009) and Dixon (2011).

**Keywords:** Cyberformance, Online performance, Practice based Research, Cyber-ethnography, Cyber-ethnotheatre, Cyber-documentation

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## Introduction

Practice based research (PBR) is an art practice related research discipline, where the basis of contribution to knowledge is a creative artifact. With its greater emphasis on practice, PBR is considered by leading universities as the most appropriate research type for arts-based researches, despite the fact that this developing research phenomenon is not yet clearly defined. The paper discusses emergent issues of the PBR new academic discipline, referring to the case of Etheatre Project, the in-progress PhD research of the author. Etheatre Project is a series of experimental cyberperformances the author directed, aiming to reinterpret and realise Brechtian theories of political performance for the digital age. The term cyberperformance, introduced by the artist, researcher and founding member of the Avatar Body *Collision*, Helen Varley Jamieson (2008), is used to describe live performance events that utilize internet technologies to bring remote performers together in real time, for remote audiences. Etheatre Project, thus, explores the interactive and political potentials of cyberperformance, by the use of the cyberspace as a political space for performance, meaning a public space, where debates, political expression and participation are taking place. The internet here is not just a communication or thematic tool, but a language for art expression, a medium, a platform which dictates content and a directing and research method. This paper looks at the use of the creative process as research methodology in Etheatre Project I, *Cyberian Chalk Circle* and *Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival* experimental cyberperformances. Focusing on the role of the director as researcher, the paper investigates the original methodologies that are developed in a digital performance PBR, such as Cyber-ethnotheatre and Cyber-documentation methods.

## Etheatre Project

Etheatre Project is a series of experimental cyberperformances the author directed, aiming to reinterpret and realise Brechtian theories of political performance for the digital age. The purpose of this practice-based research (PBR) is to redefine the characteristics of theatre and the methodologies of theatre directing within the phenomenon of 'remediation' of cyberculture. Focusing on the new medium of the internet, it explores the interactive and political potentials of online theatre (*cyberperformance*), by the use of free internet spaces as theatrical stage (*cyberstage*). This chapter refers to the free character of the internet medium in relation to this low-cost characteristic, rather than to describe a democratic medium, owing to its debatable freedom of speech.

A series of three experimental online performances comprise the practical research of Etheatre Project. The Etheatre Project I and II *cyberperformances* are going to use the internet as socio-political tool for debates, political expression and participation, focusing each time on a different aspect of the research: 'spaceless' - 'bodyless', 'liveness' and interactivity. This will lead to a final *cyberperformance*, Etheatre Project III, including all of the previous

research outcomes and issues, in order to answer the research questions in a visual way. Etheatre final project will be a journey from one platform to another; UpStage, WaterWheel Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Messenger, video conferencing applications, web pages and blogs will turn into a cyberstage, a meeting point for audience and performers, where distant people will be connected and stories will be shared. The rehearsal space is also internet-based, in order to challenge the relationships between the performers themselves and the director.

Etheatre Project I, *Cyberian Chalk Circle* and *Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival*, discussed the socio-political practice of the internet in the Egyptian revolution of 2011, through the love story of Grusha and Simon from Bertolt Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Grusha, a kitchen maid of the Caucasian palace, loses her fiancé, Simon, during the palace revolution, while she founds and saves Michael, the Governor's son. In order to raise Michael safely, Grusha gets married to a very ill man. One day, while she is washing linen by the stream, Simon arrives on the other side of the river. Grusha tries to explain him what happened, but Simon leaves when she claims that this is her own child, in order to protect Michael. The choice of the specific scene adaptation for the Etheatre Project I arrived from the absent presence similarity of the river scene with a contemporary online network webcam conversation, increased by the communication gap. Simon and Grusha can see and talk to each other, but they cannot touch each other, while Grusha's secrets create the sense of a broken conversation, where one says something but means something else.

Both performances, placed in Egypt of 2011, looked at the political power of the internet, using Brecht's political theatre directing methodologies. While people in Cairo were removing their passwords from their Wi-Fi routers so protesters can communicate with each other and the rest of the world, Grusha connects with the audience asking them to help her find Simon. Simon is an Egyptian soldier, Grusha's fiancé that she lost because of the revolution. However, the audience does not have just to find Simon, but also to explain him that Grusha got married (*urfi* contract) with someone else, because she found and kept a child, Michael. In Egypt women are not allowed to be single mothers, unless they are married or they have an *urfi* contract, a kind of a Muslim marriage.

Both cyberperformances took place on UpStage, an avatar-based, open source platform for cyberperformance, created by the programmer Douglas Bagnall in 2004 for the Avatar Body *Collision* theatre group. Images, animations, audio, web cams, text and drawing tools are available for any artist interested in cyberperformance. However, there is not a live streaming option on Upstage platform, unless a commercial streaming company is hired. In Etheatre I, that limitation was used as a tool for the creation of a slow internet connection effect to the participants. Thus, instead of a live streaming, snapshots from the performer's webcam were sent to the audience every one second, creating the sense of a bad connection, enhanced by the computer broken voice. UpStage offers to its performers the possibility of having the text they write on the chat box spoken by a computer voice of their choice. Apart

from UpStage other online platforms such as Facebook and Second Life where used as cyberstages, either for the plot development or as a theatre space in the case of Second Life (Figure 1).

Moreover, by creating a Twitter and a Webpage/Blog of the Etheatre Project, this research intends to attract people to comment on the thematic subject of each cyberformance anonymously, through a series of linked questions and games, in order to obtain material for the devised performances and to build a communicative relationship with the audience (Figure 2 a, b). Thus, the internet here is not just a communication or thematic tool, but a language for art expression, a medium, a platform which dictates content and a directing and research method.

### **Mediation: Cyber-ethnotheatre and Cyber-documentation**

Etheatre Project uses ethnographic methodologies, in order to study the audience behavior and experience in such an interactive political event and collect the participants' opinions about the experimental performances' outcomes. Due to the digital approach of Etheatre Project and the use of the internet as a research method, Cyber-ethnography is the basic methodological approach of this research. According to Christine Hine (2000, p.4), the ethnography of the internet looks at the ways in which technology is experienced in use. Cyber-ethnography, thus, is the ethnographic method that studies the online interaction of the virtual communities, by observing the audience experience of such interactive cyberspaces participation.

*Cyberian Chalk Circle* and *Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival* are principally chat-based performances. In both cyberrformances, the audience chatted to each other before the actual event begins, while in the end the participants continued their conversation. The Etheatre participants are able to comment on the performances and talk about their experience through the Etheatre cyberspaces, while online discussions are held at the end of each experimental cyberformance between the artists and the audience, which are used as a basis for improvement. Furthermore, their comments during the performance effect and change the performance itself. *Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival*, for example, was divided into two parts, due to the observation that during the *Cyberian Chalk Circle* performance the audience had not enough time to look at Simon's Facebook page and interact with it appropriately.

According to Brecht (1949, p. 205), theatre representations, by taking second place to what is presented, leave the audience productively disposed even after the end of the event or as Marc Silberman (1987) claims, the task is to organize the space or the dialogical situation in a larger framework, which allows a new subjectivity, a new individual and collective subject. Apart from text interaction with the performer, the participants commented on each other's posts during the performance, playing the role of the Brechtian clowns:



*When I get a theater into my clutches, I will hire two clowns. They enter the stage between acts acting as spectators. They exchange views about the play and the audience and conclude bet about the end of the play [...] In a tragedy, the scenery will be changed with open curtains. Clowns walk across the stage and order: "Now he [the hero] will fall, yes. Lower the lights" (Lyon, Breuer, 1995, p. 49)*

Brecht wanted the audience to enter the theatre space and behave as in to a circus, boxing rink or racecourse, rather than as if they entered a temple. Cyberperformance materializes that idea of Brechtian new relationship between the stage and the audience, where the participants have the complete freedom, by offering tools for real time audience interaction and feedback. In Etheatre Project I the audience was writing the dialogues, directing the actor and influencing the turn of the performance, commenting on each scenario. Jon Whitmore (1994, p.11) argues that theatre cannot take place without the communication between the event and the audience, drawing attention to the fact that as most theorists agree, spectators provide feedback to the performers and to one another during the performance event. For instance, when one of the audience members lied to Grusha that Simon got married, someone respond "Shame on you!".

Consequently, in Etheatre Project, the Cyber-ethnography takes the form of Cyber-ethnotheatre. Ethnotheatre is a performance-based ethnographic method constituted by a dramatic event, such as live performance that uses the data collected by the researcher as a performance material (Leavy, 2009, p. 144). Patricia Leavy (2009, p.141) sites Joe Norris position that drama can serve as a complete research activity, with the potential to serve as a method of data collection, analysis and (re) presentation, in order to strengthen the validity of Ethnotheatre as a research method. In Etheatre Project, indeed, Cyber-ethnotheatre is not just used as a method to analyze the data in a performative way, but also as a data collection tool. For example, open to the public rehearsals took place from the very beginning in both Etheatre Project I performances. People were invited to join the rehearsals and work with the performer, taking an active role by commenting and asking questions. They played the character of the inspiring audience, the abovementioned Brechtian clowns, who challenge the performance by not following the theatrical contracts. Brecht used to keep his rehearsals open, in order for actors to get used to spectators and start working with an audience as early in the progress as possible (Weber and Munk, 1967). Accordingly, Etheatre Project's I rehearsals were challenged by their audience, who determined the final product with their behavior (Figure 8).

However, Documentation is the basic method of data collection in this research as it records the live experiments, an essential method for a live practice-based performance research, where the visual materials can be extremely useful, due to the tangible character of theatre. For the collection of

the performance data, Helen Varley Jamieson's (2008, p.20) proposed documentation forms are used, such as video recordings of the performances, rehearsal and performances text logs, screen grabs pictures (PRTSC), email records, performance materials, and online audience feedbacks. Jamieson has arrived at those forms by Philip Auslander's *The Performativity of Performance Documentation* (2006), a paper that looks at the complex relationship between performance, documentary and authenticity.

Similarly to other performance art forms, video recording is the basic method for live event documentation. In the case of cyberperformance though, video recording is substituted by screen recording. Instead of an external camera, the event is recorded as it appears on the computer screen of the documentation coordinator (Figure 3). Similarly, the screen grabs pictures (PRTSC), still image captures of the computer screen, replace the photos of the classic camera (Figure 4). Moreover, email records and performance materials are collected for the documentation of the devising, research and production processes. These forms of documentation offer to any artist and researcher the opportunity of keeping the process log, the route that was followed for the realization of the live performance from the very beginning. Finally, text logs (rehearsal and performance) are very useful materials for both researchers and artists, as they offer the scripted version of the live event and the audience real-time feedback text (Figure 6,7). Steve Dixon (2011, p.41), digital performance artist, researcher and academic, rightly underlines that the web has become a key platform for both performance documentation and the dissemination of research outputs. Indeed, the video recordings of Etheatre Projects are firstly uploaded on YouTube and then posted on the Etheatre webpage (Figure 5). This suggests the growth of an emerging form of data collection and documentation in contemporary research, the one of Cyber-documentation that offers new creative tools and research approaches to contemporary researchers.

### **Originality: Results and Discussion**

The originality of Etheatre Project lies in its consideration of the political character of cyberperformance and the use of Brecht's directing methodologies in online theatre. Although it explores subjects that already have been discussed in the past, such as interactivity in cyberspace and the 'spaceless' – 'bodyless' and 'liveness' character of cyberperformance, it is going to be a novel thesis. This research will push the limits of public interaction within a specific political context, while the exploration of the cyberperformance characteristics is going to arrive through a theatre art experience, where even the live representation of the same performance, brings a different product, as proved by *Cyberian Chalk Circle* and *the Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival* cyberperformances.

Etheatre Project case study provides a clear sense of how PBR research combines elements of old and new research methods, especially in the field of digital performance. According to Steve Dixon (2011, p. 43), "in the emergent field of digital performance there are clear opportunities to develop truly

original methodologies, hypotheses, arguments and creative outputs”. Additionally, David McConnell (2000, p. 243) argues that “any research into computer environments is bound to be exploratory, as research in open online environments is a new phenomenon”. Indeed, the internet offers new creative tools to both artists and researchers, while the mixture of existing methodologies with these tools lead to digitalized forms of research methods, such as Cyber-ethnography and Cyber-documentation.

Moreover, the combination of research and performance methodologies and the use of the creative process as research methodology bring forward new possibilities for original theses and performance events. According to Helen Varley Jamieson (2008, p.11), using the creative process as a research methodology “opens up the possibility for unexpected opportunities along the way – something that is crucial when experimenting with new technologies and in an emerging art form. This ‘haphazard process’ allowed to Etheatre Project the opportunity to collaborate with other artists for the realization of its performances, such as the remote collaboration with the UpStage platform coordinators. Moreover, the date of the 11:11:11 UpStage Festival played a crucial role for the context of the performance that combined the Egyptian Revolution with the Remembrance Day celebrations.

Ethnotheatre, on the other hand, by combining the ethnographic with performance methods, acknowledges the consideration of performance as a research activity. This mixture of research and performance methodologies breaks the academic division between artist and researchers, allowing original methodologies to be developed. The role of the director as researcher is revealed in Etheatre Project case, where Brecht’s directing methodologies are used as part of the research methodologies of the project.

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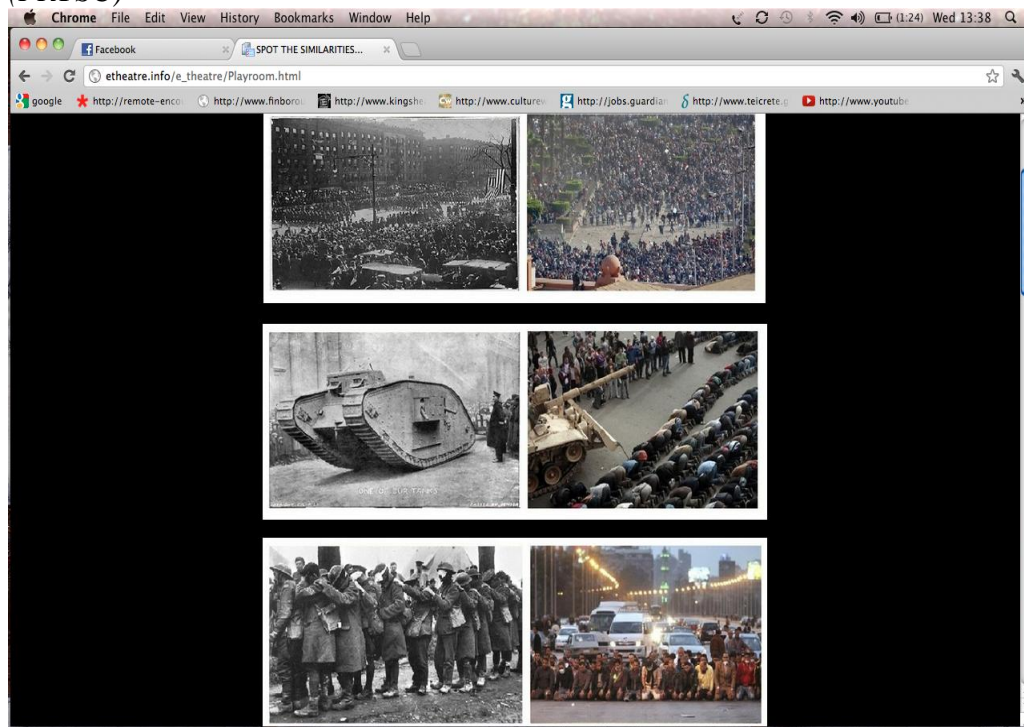
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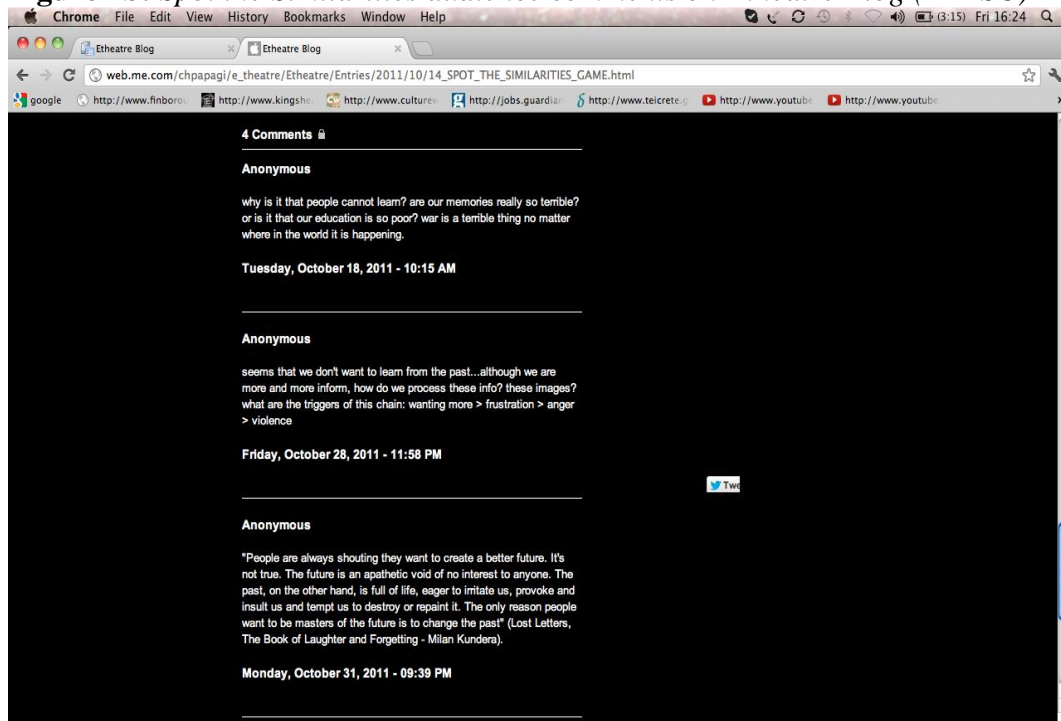
**Figure 1:** *Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival on Second Life. The avatars are watching the performance in the virtual stage designed for the festival needs (PRTSC)*



**Figure 2a:** *Spot the Similarities* game on Etheatre Blog. Pictures from World War I and from Egypt during the 2011 revolution where correlated, commenting on the Remembrance Day celebration of the 'war to end all wars' (PRTSC)

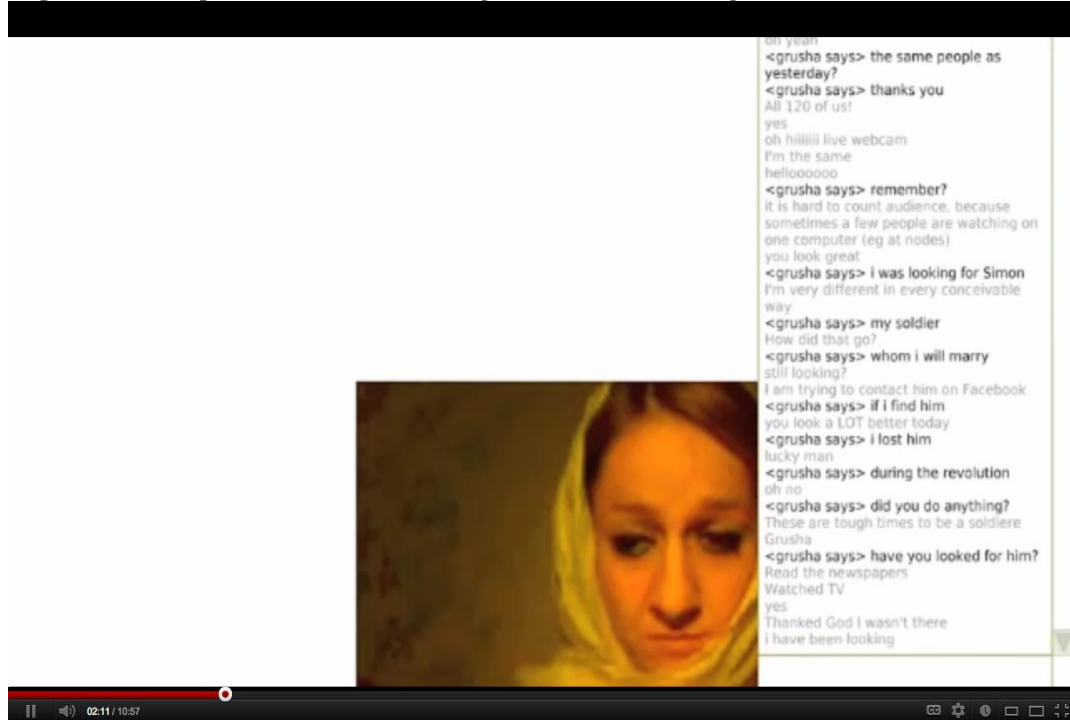


**Figure 2b:** *Spot the Similarities* audience comments on Etheatre Blog (PRTSC)

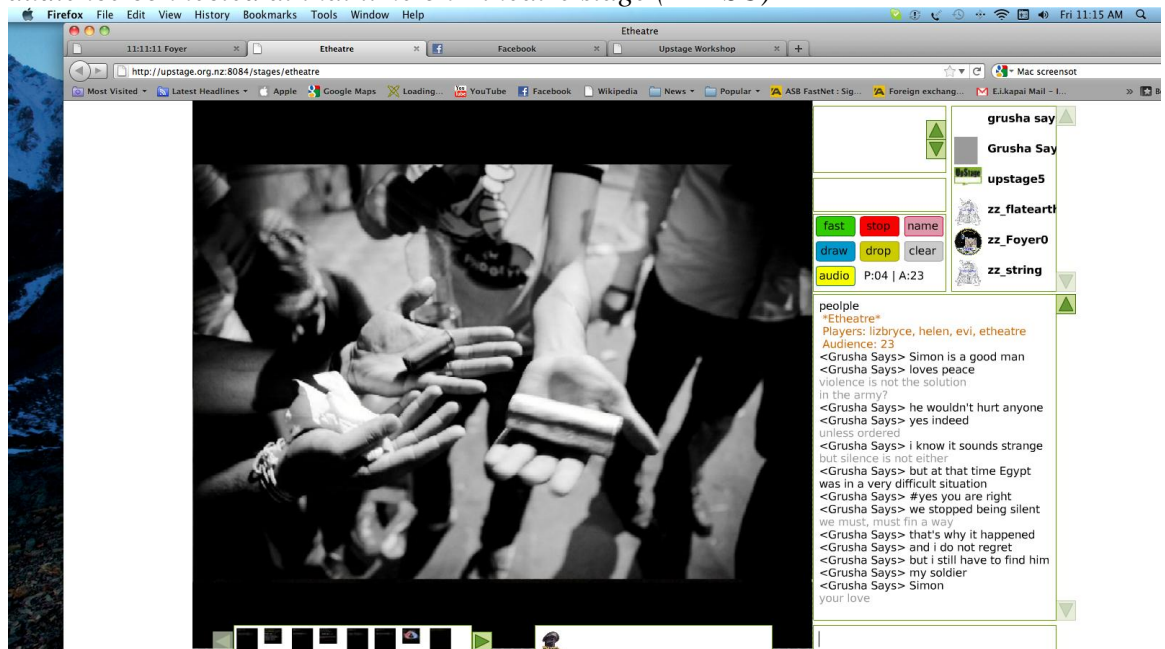




**Figure 3:** *Computer screen recording as video recording (PRTSC)*



**Figure 4:** *Screen Grabs Picture. UpStage platform on the performer's screen. P:04 represents the size of the performers and the A: 23 the number of the audience connected at that time on Etheatre stage (PRTSC)*





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in shock  
 <grusha says> i need your help  
 <grusha says> my connection is not good  
 what can we do?  
 hi linda from mexico, i'm barbara from barcelonaa  
 <grusha says> might fail anytime  
 oh  
 oh  
 we will help  
 <grusha says> sites are blocked  
 it might be censorship?  
 hi barb  
 oh  
 tell us what to do#  
 <grusha says> i was trying for long to load on this site  
 censorship?  
 your country?  
 it loaded for us  
 <grusha says> i need your help

**Figure 7:** *Online audience feedback. Cyberian Chalk Circle goes 11:11:11 UpStage Festival Part B (Text Log)*

which one would you like us to open?  
 bravo  
 thank you  
 very strong piece  
 lovely  
 is it 2 mins silence in UK now?  
 it tells more than many youtube cideos i have seen  
 videos  
 live imagies from uk are wonderfull  
 that link does not work for me in europe  
 great show thank you  
 Cannot play media. Sorry, this media is not available in your  
 territory.

**Figure 8:** *Rehearsal Log (13 May 2011). Cyberian Chalk Circle*

<Grusha Says> I need your help fr  
 <FR> I'm ready to help you. What I can do for you, dear?  
 <Grusha Says> I see you have internet access  
 <FR> as you  
 <Grusha Says> I can only access upstage  
 <FR> weird. why?  
 <Grusha Says> you can't enter chatroomsf  
 <Grusha Says> or fb  
 <Grusha Says> or twitter in egypt  
 <Grusha Says> at the momont  
 <Grusha Says> moment  
 <Grusha Says> because of the revolution  
 <FR> hmmm! ah  
 <Grusha Says> limited access to any means  
 <FR> and UpStage?  
 <Grusha Says> could you help me?  
 <FR>I can try  
 <Grusha Says> upstage is a pirate site  
 <FR> no it's not



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<Grusha Says> in egypt it is right now  
<FR> ah  
<Grusha Says> at least we use it like that  
<FR> weird  
<Grusha Says> not weird  
<FR> are you serious?  
<Grusha Says> arts were always helping expressing  
<Grusha Says> political matters  
<Grusha Says> undercover  
<Grusha Says> i am looking for simon shashava  
<Grusha Says> a young man  
<FR> ?  
<Grusha Says> early 30s  
<Grusha Says> tall  
<Grusha Says> dark  
<Grusha Says> handsome  
<FR> Could I be your Simon?  
<Grusha Says> hahahahha  
<Grusha Says> so kind of you to offer  
<Grusha Says> but simon was ready to marry me  
<Grusha Says> would you?  
<FR> i think i'm falling in love with you  
<Grusha Says> ahahahahha  
<FR> i'm serious  
<Grusha Says> please fr